

PROGRAM-CONTROLLED HOUSEHOLD APPLIANCE AND METHOD OF OPERATING

THE APPLIANCE

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Cross-Reference to Related Application:

This application is a continuation of copending International Application No. PCT/EP02/03199, filed March 21, 2002, which designated the United States and was not published in English.

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Background of the Invention:

Field of the Invention:

The invention relates to a program-controlled household appliance and method of operating the appliance with a set of program sequences that are stored in a suitable memory and are indicated when required, and also with an external program selector, by which programs can be individually selected and activated, it being possible for each position of the program selector to be permanently assigned a program, and with additional functions for the manipulation of the selected program, and also relates to a household appliance suitable for realizing the method, which has in its indicating area elements for program and function selection and elements for informing the user.

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The prior art discloses household appliances, specifically, washing machines, in which a selector switch can be used to select a program from a set of programs that are stored in a memory and the program runs automatically after starting, 5 usually initiated by actuating a start button. A program is the term used for a sequence of individual steps proceeding one after the other in time, each individual step being determined by its function, such as washing, rinsing, spinning, and the parameters such as temperature, time 10 duration, and rotational speed. The programs are configured such that an optimum effect is achieved with them with respect to the type and amount of articles to be treated.

The user uses a switch to select a suitable program; the 15 sequence and monitoring of the program take place automatically and the progress of the program is generally indicated on the operator control panel.

In the case of modern household appliances, on the operator 20 control panel there are function buttons, which offer the user the possibility of manipulating the program selected by the selector switch. This takes place by individual program steps being repeated or else skipped. For example, in the case of a washing machine, the "intensive wash" button can be used to 25 extend the time of the program in the "washing" phase, in order to clean unusually heavily soiled laundry with the

desired intensity, or the "crease guard" function button can be used to shorten the spinning process or reduce the maximum speed during spinning. The selection of an additional function is generally indicated by a luminous element.

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Mechanical and/or electrical operator control elements, in particular, rotary switches and pushbutton switches, are used as switches for the program selection. The selected program is indicated by the position of the selector switch and/or by 10 optical indicating elements such as lamps, LEDs, or displays with LEDs or using LCD technology. In the case of rotary switches, each position of the selector switch may be associated with a symbol, identifiable on the operator control panel, in a viewing window or by a marking present on the 15 selector switch pointing to symbols in the operator control panel.

In the simplest case, numerals are used as the symbols; the various programs are, then, giving consecutive numbers. The 20 user may have to consult the operating instructions to find out that functions carry out the program with the given designation and for which articles to be treated the program is designed. This increases the effort for the user and reduces the acceptance of such a household appliance. If the 25 level of concentration is not adequate, operating errors may occur.

The aim is for the operator control panel to guide the user logically through the input. For such a purpose, information indicated on the operator control panel must be adequate in 5 terms of its amount and meaningfulness to enable the user to select programs and additional functions without error.

So far it has only been possible for this object to be achieved inadequately. The space on the operator control 10 panel is relatively confined, and it quickly becomes cluttered if there is an excessive amount of information or excessively detailed information. This may, again, result in operating errors and a decrease in the acceptance of such a household appliance.

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A change has taken place in favor of using numerals and symbols that provide indications of the content of the program. For example, in the case of a washing machine, the maximum washing temperature that can be reached in the case of 20 the selected program may be indicated. The image of a stylized hand in a tub as a symbol for hand washing is generally known and is accepted. A tub with the numeral "95" in it is self-explanatory as a symbol for a boil-washing cycle.

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The set of known and self-explanatory symbols is limited. It is problematical from the viewpoint of the manufacturer to extend the number of symbols depicted because there is no standardization and because unknown symbols can lead to 5 misinterpretation and, consequently, to programming errors.

In the case of most household appliances, a mixture of numerals, symbols, and terms in plain text are used, on one hand, to convey maximum information to the user and, on the 10 other hand, to keep the operator display panel uncluttered by limiting the number and length of the information.

It may further help to keep the operator display panel uncluttered if individual operator control elements have dual 15 assignments. For example, the start button can also be used for interrupting the program and restarting it. The desired function is selected by multiple actuation of the button.

All the measures described fail to provide a satisfactorily 20 successful result. Optimum, error-free operation without operating instructions is scarcely possible, in particular, in the case of programs that are rarely used.

A modern household appliance is expected to be able to perform 25 programs that satisfy the increasing requirements for cleanliness, environmental compatibility, operating simplicity,

new standards, and economy and that offer an optimum program for a constantly extended variety of articles to be specially treated. With the expansion in international trade, the manufacturers operate in many national markets, with the consequence that such household appliances must meet the special requirements of the respective intended country. The aim of the manufacturers is to produce a uniform basic model and adapt it to the special needs of the national markets by measures that are as simple as possible. One measure could include sticking a sheet bearing plain text in the desired national language over areas of the operator control panel that have inscriptions in plain text. This method has the advantage that the manufacturer can produce a model of the household appliance that is the same for all export countries and the country-specific adaptation of the household appliance can be performed locally by the seller or the user. It constitutes additional effort that each household appliance must be accompanied by a range of sheets in various languages. Such an effort is inconsiderable in comparison with the obvious advantages. A major disadvantage is that the use of sheets adversely affects the overall appearance of the operator control panel, for instance, the sheet can be stuck on improperly or the sheets can become easily soiled and/or torn, in particular, at the edges. Such a variant is incompatible with the high demands expected of a modern household appliance.

To overcome these drawbacks, household appliances are equipped with operator control panels that are specifically designed for a language region. For this purpose, it is necessary to produce different types of household appliance equipped with different operator control panels in accordance with the number of export countries. In addition to the relatively minor extra effort in production, there is increased effort in sales. The production of specially equipped household appliances for different language regions increases the effort involved in stock-keeping, while reducing sales flexibility, for instance, when sales fluctuate. For example, a household appliance produced for the English language region cannot be sold in Germany, or only with difficulty.

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In an indicating and operating unit known from German Patent DE 31 33 176 C1 for computer-controlled, electrical household appliances, it is provided that the language of the indication can be selected by a keypad. It is also known from German Published, Non-Prosecuted Patent Application DE 198 30 844 A1 to perform in accordance with the set national language an automatic allocation of programs (cooking recipes) existing in all national variants, and, consequently, to make allowance for a specific frequency of programs respectively called up. This means that, for example, a pork-roast recipe is provided in the same form in German descriptions as in descriptions in

any other language, but, given a different choice of national languages, is offered in a different sequence on a program list available for selection.

5 Summary of the Invention:

It is accordingly an object of the invention to provide a program-controlled household appliance and method of operating the appliance that overcome the hereinabove-mentioned disadvantages of the heretofore-known devices and methods of 10 this general type and that, starting from a basic model of a household appliance that is the same for all countries, allow the specific adaptation of programs to the individual intended countries to be made possible by simple manipulations carried out locally by the seller or user. The operating convenience 15 of the household appliance is to be improved and the household appliance is to satisfy all aesthetic requirements.

With the foregoing and other objects in view, there is provided, in accordance with the invention, a method of 20 operating a program-controlled household appliance, including storing a set of program sequences in a memory and indicating the program sequences when required, permanently storing a set of programs specific to language regions in the memory, individually selecting and activating at least one of the 25 programs with an external program selector having selector positions, permanently assigning each of the selector

positions to at least one of the programs, providing additional functions for manipulation of a program selected by the program selector, selecting a desired indicating language by input manipulation, and making available an associated set of programs specific to language regions for selection by the 5 program selector when an indicating language is selected.

It is also an object of the invention to adapt the household appliance of the same basic type in an easy way with regard to 10 specific program selections to the conditions and special circumstances in different countries.

According to the invention, a set of programs specific to language regions is permanently stored in the memory, a 15 desired indicating language is selected by input manipulation, and an assigned set of programs specific to language regions is made available for selection by the program selector when an indicating language is selected. As such, just by selecting a desired language for the indicating elements, the 20 user can activate a set of data associated with this language concerning programs and user information, without further interventions being necessary in relation to individual programs specific to language regions.

25 It is important for the invention that a set of user information items and a set of data for controlling the

programs are contained in the memory. In this respect, the user information may contain a package of equivalent terms and additional terms that refer to special features or program steps that can be called up only for one country or a number 5 of countries associated with the same language region.

The household appliance according to the invention is distinguished, in particular, by the fact that all the relevant information, such as the designation of the selected 10 program, the progress of the program, the additional functions, and the language selection, are indicated in plain text by a display that is disposed in the operator control panel and is controlled by the treatment program.

15 In a refinement of the invention, it is envisaged to output the user information items successively on the display. Consequently, it is possible with a predetermined display to indicate more information and more precise information, which make operator control more reliable.

20 The invention offers further advantages. Faults and operator errors can be indicated in the selected national language, as can suggestions for optimum program composition. The information indication according to the invention allows the 25 user to be guided in a logical way by the display; the amount of information can be extended, without the risk of

cluttering; the plain-text representation cannot be misinterpreted; operator errors are virtually ruled out.

The invention may be set up such that the language selection
5 is controlled by the display. After calling up the selection function, a switching element is used to indicate on the display each language present in the menu one after the other. After confirmation of the selected language, the set of information items associated with this language is activated
10 internally; the operator instructions and the specified program steps are permanently associated with the corresponding position of the program selector. After that, the program selection, the indication of the progress of the program, the error and fault messages, and, also, the
15 additional functions are indicated on the display in the language chosen by the user. Similarly, the treatment programs proceed in the way specified for the country.

The method according to the invention gives the manufacturer
20 the possibility of covering the different requirements of the specific markets with just one household appliance that is the same for all countries. Consequently, the effort involved in production, but, in particular, in the operational, sales, and customer-service organizations, can be reduced considerably.
25 The invention offers further advantages. The set of stored national languages can be extended without any great effort.

The selection of a specific national language from the set of stored languages is reversible, i.e., the chosen language can be replaced by another at any time and as often as desired.

5 A special refinement of the invention envisages selecting the set of user information items in one language and the program control functions for a different country. This provides the possibility, for example, of adapting the programs in a way corresponding to the conditions in British households, but to
10 choose German as the operating language.

In accordance with another mode of the invention, the set of programs specific to language regions is provided with corresponding user information.

15 In accordance with a further mode of the invention, the indicating language is selected with a selector switch.

In accordance with an added mode of the invention, after
20 selecting the indicating language, each position of the program selector is permanently assigned a program specific to a language region and each program is permanently assigned a set of user information items specific to a language region.

25 In accordance with an additional mode of the invention, the indicating language selecting step is reversible.

In accordance with yet another mode of the invention, the programs specific to countries and the user information specific to languages are separately selected from one
5 another.

In accordance with yet a further mode of the invention, the language selection is acknowledged with an indicating element.
10 In accordance with yet an added mode of the invention, the selected indicating language is acknowledged with an indication of an internationally intelligible symbol. Preferably, the symbol is a letter or a word in the selected language.
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In accordance with yet an additional mode of the invention, an operating state and/or a program sequence is indicated with one of internationally customary symbols and terms customary in the selected language, the symbols and terms being
20 permanently associated with the program.

With the objects of the invention in view, in a program-controlled household appliance, there is also provided, a control panel including a memory storing a set of program sequences, a controller connected to the memory and programmed to execute the program sequences and indicate the program
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sequences, an external program selector having selector positions, the program selector connected to the controller for individually selecting and activating the programs, each of the selector positions being permanently assigned to one of the programs, functional units for manipulating a selected one of the programs, an indicating area having program and function selection elements, informational elements for informing a user about a selection of the programs and the functional units, and a display as an indicating element for indicating respective ones of the programs and parameters of the programs, the memory storing a set of programs, from which at least two different ones of the programs can be called up specifically for language regions, and operator control elements functionally linked to a command control of the controller for a selection of languages and programs specific to at least one of language regions and user information.

In accordance with again another feature of the invention, the display indicates the selected language.

In accordance with again a further feature of the invention, the external program selector is a rotary selector having a number of positions for selecting the programs and each of the positions is assigned an indicating element displaying an alphanumeric indication.

In accordance with again an added feature of the invention, the indicating element is a single display on which an assigned program is indicated according to a position of the rotary selector.

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In accordance with a concomitant feature of the invention, the indication of the program on the display contains therein individual parameters of a selected one of the programs.

10 Other features that are considered as characteristic for the invention are set forth in the appended claims.

Although the invention is illustrated and described herein as embodied in a method of operating a program-controlled 15 household appliance, it is, nevertheless, not intended to be limited to the details shown because various modifications and structural changes may be made therein without departing from the spirit of the invention and within the scope and range of equivalents of the claims.

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The construction and method of operation of the invention, however, together with additional objects and advantages thereof, will be best understood from the following description of specific embodiments when read in connection 25 with the accompanying drawings.

Brief Description of the Drawing:

The figure is an operator control panel of a washing machine according to the invention.

5 Description of the Preferred Embodiments:

Referring now to the single figure of the drawing, it is seen that an important feature of the washing machine is the display 4 in the operator control panel 1, which serves for indicating all user information in plain text. The meaningful content of the information conveyed in plain text is composed such that the user is reliably guided even without operating instructions.

15 The adaptation of the washing machine to the country-specific needs and conditions begins with the selection of the national language. By actuating the button 7, the "language selection" menu stored in the memory is activated. On the display 4, a language is indicated in plain text. This takes place in the way customary for the country, for example "Deutsch," "English," "Polski," etc. By actuating the button 8, each language stored in the language menu is indicated on the display 4 one after the other. When the desired language appears on the display 4, it is activated with the start button 5. Activating the national language causes each 20 position of the selector switch 2 to be internally assigned a program that includes, as required, a sequence of steps

deviating country-specifically from the standard program. The programs are adapted to the specific requirements of individual countries and the conditions prevailing there, for instance, the fact that in British households there are

5 frequently hot water connections. It is, consequently, possible that, with the same position of the selector switch 2, the washing machine carries out a different sequence of program steps in Germany than in the UK.

10 Once the selected language has been activated, the language indication on the display 4 goes out. After that, the "program selection" menu can be activated with the control button 7. The program is selected in the usual way by turning of the selector switch 2; the designation of the program

15 appears on the display. This indication goes out after about 10 seconds and is overwritten by information concerning the operating state or the progress of the program, such as, for example, the temperature of the water, the time of day, and the remaining running time of the washing program.

20 Also indicated on the display 4 are the activated additional functions, corresponding to the assignment of the buttons 6, and also operator errors when incorrect functions are selected. An operator error is indicated, for example, if the

25 "intensive wash" function has been activated and the rinsing program has been set by the program selector. Operating

faults in the water supply or improper closing of the loading door are, likewise, indicated in the selected national language on the display 4. The usual signaling tone has a supporting effect, in the sense that the user is requested to

5 act in a way corresponding to the error message because interpretation of previously customary luminous signals and/or symbols is no longer required. The major advantage of the washing machine according to the invention is the output of all program information through the display in plain text and,

10 also, the support of the selection functions by the display. Operator errors by the user are, consequently, virtually ruled out; operating instructions are usually superfluous.